

BETWEEN PROMISE AND ECSTASY: HOPE AS A SUBJECT OF AN ENGAGED THEOLOGY

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Abstract

This article outlines a socially-engaged theology that retrieves hope as an essential theological concept. The argument focuses not so much on the specific orientation that a socially engaged theology might take, but more on its motives. Here two notions of hope need to be distinguished: the hope that is future-oriented (hoping that . . .) and the act of hoping as a mode of being in the world (to live in hope or hopefully). The first type of hope is derivative of the second, which means that the act of hoping acquires a hermeneutical privilege over the hope directed to the future. Furthermore, the distinction between 'hoping that . . .' and 'living in hope' highlights the difference between—with St. Paul—the old person and the new person who understands everything in a new light. This difference is articulated in terms of a productive dissatisfaction rooted in a life lived by faith by hope. Hope thereby turns faith into an ecstatic stance. It is this ecstasy endowed by hope that joins faith—and theology as faith's companion—to dedicated engagement with the world.

1. Introduction

'Now faith, hope, love abide, these three, but the least of these is hope.' This deliberately ironic paraphrase of the classic biblical passage addressed to the congregation in Corinth is nonetheless soundly Pauline. Indeed, it calls attention to an imbalance that is disquieting for current theology and the church, one which St. Paul himself would surely have criticized. What has become of hope in our time—the conviction that that from the future more may be expected than what has long been the case? Where is 'the God of hope' (Rom. 15:13) in whom Christians place their unconditional trust? Where has the hope gone that has been, after all, an essential feature—not just a dispensable ingredient—of the historic Christian faith?

The person who lives, hopes. Indeed, as Ernst Bloch once remarked, where there is hope there is also religion.¹ Yet do Christians still hope—today, here and now? Or have we simply split up our once 'great' hopes into smaller and smaller hopes in order to make them more manageable? Or maybe some of our hopes have reached their natural end—i.e., have been realized—and thus hope seems to recede in importance?

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¹ See Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Gesamtausgabe Vol. 5) (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1985), 1404.

From these questions, and the diagnosis that follows, one thing comes into focus: namely, the relation between the precarity and uncertainty of our present situation and the fact that hope seems to have disappeared as an integral aspect of faith and as a subject of dogmatic interest. To be sure, for everything there is a season, and one might say that the season of hope has passed, the 'Theology of Hope' has had its time. That of course was in the 1960s and 1970s when figures like Jürgen Moltmann, Gabriel Marcel, Josef Pieper, Johann Baptist Metz, and Dorothee Sölle joined their voices with fellow travelers of the time who were part of a wider social and political discontent. The proponents of a 'Theology of Hope' mostly voted politically left and preached a message heralding God's 'option for the poor'².

Yet the politicization of the gospel, which is always susceptible to devolving into an ideology, was bound to wear off at some point, particularly because the gesture of permanent consternation cannot be sustained indefinitely. Thus, hope fell into a recession and has not returned since as a leading topic in theology.³ It is precisely this tension between hope's prominence and its fading away within theological teaching that stimulates this productive and—hopefully—inventive project: *to present an outline of a socially-engaged theology with the help of a re-profiled concept of hope*. I should immediately add that this essay serves as a prolegomenon to a socially-engaged theology for today rather than a ready-made proposal with all the answers. It is, nevertheless, a proposal that might contribute to a larger account of what could be coined as one Christian way of dwelling in this world characterized not only by hope, but also by gratitude, charity, trust, love, and spiritual trial⁴.

Accordingly, one might say that this essay is concerned with *grammatical* clarifications—or, more concretely—with a thorough conceptual analysis of 'hope' as a theologically-crucial notion that reifies and substantiates considerations regarding its practice and its history in and outside the church(es). My methodological wager is that this analytical approach—in combination with its genuinely theological application—will shed new light on one of the most significant topics in Christian dogmatics presently in eclipse.⁵

² It is important to recall the specific historical and cultural context in which the 'Theology of Hope' burst on the scene if one is to understand their program (as well as the one put forward by the 'God-is-dead' and liberation theologians) as a response to a specific post-war constellation of guilt and suppressed shame after genocides and the Holocaust, not to mention severe generation conflicts, new cultural movements, the growing dualism between West and East, and a new war in Vietnam. For a vivid sketch of these factors, see Thomas Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1966), esp. the Preface.

³ This claim has to be qualified. While it is correct, I think, in regard to the German-speaking scene, things look different in Anglophone countries that enjoyed a permanent, yet not pervasive interest in the topic in the framework of feminist and cosmological theologies. See, for instance, Emilie Townes, *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993); Robert J. Russell, *Cosmology, Evolution, and Resurrection Hope: Theology and Science in Creative Mutual Interaction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2006).

⁴ On spiritual trial (or struggle) see Simon D. Podmore, *Struggling with God. Kierkegaard and the Temptation of Spiritual Trial* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2013), esp. 185–89; *Anfechtung. Versuch der Entmarginalisierung eines Klassikers*, edited by Pierre Bühler, Stefan Berg, Andreas Hunziker, and Hartmut von Sass (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

⁵ More recent studies on hope are in fact rare; see Kevin Hughes, 'The Crossing of Hope, or Apophatic Eschatology', in *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition amid Modernity and Postmodernity*, edited by Miroslav Volf and William Katerberg (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 101–24; David Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age: Deconstruction, Negative Theology, and the Future of Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), chapter 3; David Elliot, *Hope and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

My argument proceeds in three steps. (1) The first part specifies the object of Christian hope. This is relevant since the biblical tradition encompasses very divergent objects to which hope is directed, including the hope to be able to hope. This systematic, albeit cursory, survey amounts to a preliminary grammatical analysis of hope as a concept leading back to God's promise as hope's essential subject-matter. (2) The second part elaborates on hope as a particular mode of existence, namely, existing in and as an act of hoping. By elaborating this mode of existence, I venture to clarify the connection between faith and hope, one important feature of which is faith's ecstatic nature, which hope inaugurates. I then follow with an explanation of what 'ecstasy' means in this specific theological context. (3) Finally, I note some highly relevant conclusions that emerge from the dynamic established between 'hope as a promise' and 'hope as an ecstatic act'. In particular, I am interested in explicating a kind of hoping that is congruent with a morally, socially, and politically engaged theology. Here, I clarify what 'engagement' implies, what are the motivational resources of faith through hope, and why the fulfillment of these ambitions remain necessarily ambivalent in an engaged theology.

2. *The Promise of Hope*

2.1. Exegetical Beginnings

Faith is a faith of hope, and that by virtue of the fact that the biblical witness is a witness to hope. This may not always bode well, however. Not infrequently, especially in the Old Testament, hope becomes the subject just where it is lacking. Had the people of Israel remained faithful to YHWH, then they would not have had to be permanently admonished to hold on to hope: 'But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to love and justice, and hope continually in your God' (Hos. 12:7; cf. also Ezek. 19:5; 37:11). To be sure, the Old Testament, which is eminently varied when it comes to the matter of hope, introduces paradigmatic figures of hope like Abraham or—in a completely different sense—Job,⁶ both of whom embody and bear the hope of Israel in distinctive ways. Some may view Deutero-Isaiah as the culminating, paramount expression of the Old Testament motif of hope: the increase, the covenant, the return or *shalom*.⁷ What is especially interesting, however, in the passage quoted from Hosea is that YHWH him/herself acts as an object of hope. Following Claus Westermann, one may discern here an important shift: a transformation from a God who vouches for the hope of specific goods to a God who him/herself is this good (cf. also Jer. 17:13). In short, according to Westermann '[t]he divine name in the expression "hope in God" replaces what linguistically and actually belongs in its place: the hoped-for, the help, the salvation.'⁸

The New Testament witness to hope is somewhat different, with the understanding that we are working with rough generalizations. In the New Testament there is a pronounced emphasis on specific objects of hope.⁹ Among the examples we can count here, there is the liberation of creation (Rom. 8:20-21); redemption (1 Thess. 5:8); eternal life

⁶ Cf. Claus Westermann, 'Das Hoffen im Alten Testament. Eine Begriffsuntersuchung' [1952], in idem, *Forschung am Alten Testament. Gesammelte Studien* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1964), 219-72, esp. 230-31.

⁷ On the renewal of the promise in Deutero-Isaiah see Walther Zimmerli, 'Verheißung und Erfüllung', *Evangelische Theologie* 12, no. 1 (1952): 34-59, 46-47.

⁸ Claus Westermann, 'Das Hoffen im Alten Testament,' 239; cf. *ibid.*, 244; further Ps 25:2; 26:1b; 62:9; 91:2.

⁹ There are some possible exceptions. For example, hope is occasionally invoked in an absolute sense (i.e., without reference to a specific object). cf. Rom. 12:12; 1 Cor. 13:13.

(Titus 1:2; 3:7); the resurrection of the dead following Jesus Christ's being raised from the dead; and God's reign as the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:15, *inter alia*). However, more subtle dissenting views also emerge in the New Testament where hope itself is to be hoped for; namely, we are being saved 'by hope' (Rom. 8:24; cf. 4:18).¹⁰

What is the upshot of these considerations? This brief sketch already points to an important finding. These scripture passages touch upon several conceivable dimensions inherent in hope theologically construed: the hope directed toward something concrete (*material*); the hope that becomes urgent through its absence (*negative*); the hope that invokes God (*theo-logical*); and finally, the hope that hopes in hope (*self-referential*). Before analyzing the negative, theo-logical, and self-referential types of hope, it is important to examine the characteristic features of the materiality of hope.

2.2. On the Grammar of Hope

To live in hope means, in one sense, not to know exactly what is hoped for (that is, both the time of its occurrence and how it will appear). Or with St. Paul: 'Now hope that is seen is not hope' (Rom. 8:24). Although what is hoped for must be entertained as a real possibility, it is also understood that it does not proceed or unfold as a necessity.¹¹ To hope therefore means to live patiently with contingencies whose outworkings one may not even begin to understand or grasp.¹² Hope's opposite is, consequently, equally and always possible, in the sense that what is hoped for is continually beleaguered by opposing and contradictory signs. The wished for, perhaps even longed for result that one anticipates in hope remains overshadowed by a persistent cloud of uncertainty. Efforts to dissipate this uncertainty are only of limited efficacy, which gives way to the insight that events are largely outside human control. For all that, we may nonetheless rightly speak of a certain 'rationality of hope,' since hoping for something that is per se excluded undermines itself: thus, no "drunk hope" (Macbeth VII.7), but rather a constrained intentionality.

At the same time, however, hope is a form or mode of being directed toward something that is specific. In contrast to 'intention,' hope (combined with confidence and desire) exhibits a positive orientation, since the object of the hope represents not a potentially neutral value but something that is regarded as good. Yet hope is distinct from and irreducible to mere confidence, because one can indeed hope for something that is possible even when it is unlikely.¹³ In this respect, confidence often merges with expect-

¹⁰ The account of hope given here is, I contend, derived from and compatible with a Pauline reading of that term and practice. This claim is put in this modest form since it is obvious that, first, the concept of hope is highly dependent on its historical embeddedness and, second, that contemporary hopes differ partly and significantly from previous articulations of the term and practice of hope. Here, a historically informed exegetical comparison would be required that is, however, beyond the ambitions of this essay. See Peter von der Osten-Sacken, *Der Gott der Hoffnung. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Theologie des Paulus* (Leipzig: EVA, 2014), esp. part IV: 'Evangelium und Hoffnung' (565-628).

¹¹ To this Ronald S. Downie, 'Hope', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 24, no. 2 (1963): 248-51; 248-49; John P. Day, 'Hope', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1969): 89-102; 95 and 100.

¹² To that extent it is not entirely fitting when one thinks that hope acts 'historically as future, ontologically as possibility, and anthropologically as freedom' (so Darren Webb, 'Christian Hope and the Politics of Utopia', *Utopian Studies* 19, no. 1 [2008]: 113-44; 124).

¹³ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung. Untersuchung zur Begründung und zu den Konsequenzen einer christlichen Eschatologie*, tenth edition (München: Chr. Kaiser, (1964) 1977), 331-32, following Ernst Bloch, who strictly distinguished between 'hope' [*Hoffnung*] and 'confidence' [*Zuversicht*].

tation to the extent that the degree of likelihood of the occurrence correlates with what is expected.¹⁴ Then again hope must be differentiated from wishing, for the simple reason that one can wish for something that is impossible, which, as already emphasized, does not apply to the objects of hope.¹⁵ An element of urgency also distinguishes wish from hope. A certain exigency attends the act of hoping that is mostly absent from the act of wishing.¹⁶ Most importantly, hope is very different from optimism: while hope is 'the sense for the possibility of the good' (this is a Kierkegaardian way of putting it),¹⁷ optimism is a programmatically positive evaluation of an open constellation and its outcomes. Thus, while an optimistic outlook can easily lead to disappointment, a hopeful disposition, though not immune from the vagaries of external factors, is neither strengthened nor undermined by specific results, whether they be deemed positive or negative.

Hope is also practical and a matter of judgment. It selects from what stands between impossibility and necessity. One who hopes, hopes for something that is special *for that person*, not necessarily because it is special in itself. One hopes for something precisely because it may become special *through the hoping*. Hope's focus on the particular does not exclude the possibility that the hope can be all-embracing as well—analogous to the way love extends to neighbor and enemy alike. There can, in other words, be a neighbor-hope and even an enemy-hope. Hope thus exhibits a double sense or dimension that is at once individual and collective—analogous to the differential but related work of memory and remembrance.¹⁸ For example, an individual or a group hopes, and an individual or a community is that for which one hopes.¹⁹

In either case, hope appears to prefer the future mode. It is aimed toward something not yet at hand, 'utopian,' for which a fitting language may fail us even as we hope for it 'radically.' As Jonathan Lear says:

Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it.²⁰

¹⁴ For more on this, see M. Jamie Ferreira, 'Kant and Kierkegaard on Hope', in *Hope: Re-examinations of an Elusive Phenomenon*, edited by Ingolf U. Dalferth and Marlene Block (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016). The patient, for example, hopes not only to receive medical aid but at the same time reasonably expects that the doctor *as* doctor will at least try to do what is required to deliver that aid.

¹⁵ This is, of course, a debatable claim. see J.M.O. Wheatley, 'Wishing and Hoping', *Analysis* 18, no. 6 (1958): 121-31, esp. 129; Richard Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), esp. chapters 2 and 6.

¹⁶ On these distinctions see also Stan van Hooft, *Hope (The Art of Living)* (Durham: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2011), 12-19, esp. 19.

¹⁷ See the distinction between hope and optimism in Terry Eagleton, *Hope without Optimism* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2015), esp. chapter 1: 'The Banality of Optimism'; also, Olivier Massin, 'Optimism', unpublished (2016).

¹⁸ Cf. Aleida Assmann, 'Cultural and Political Frames of Forgetting', in *Forgiving and Forgetting. Theology and the Margins of Soteriology*, edited by Hartmut von Sass and Johannes Zacher (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

¹⁹ Examples of exhortations to hope individually (Isa. 42:6; Lam. 3:21,24) and collectively (Ps. 130:7; Hos. 12:7) are amply found in scripture.

²⁰ Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 103; on this also Hubert L. Dreyfus, 'Comments on Jonathan Lear's "Radical Hope"', *Philosophical Studies* 144, no. 1 (2009): 63-70, esp. 64 and 68; Nancy Sherman, 'The Fate of a Warrior Culture: On Jonathan Lear's "Radical Hope"', *Philosophical Studies* 144, no. 1 (2009): 71-80, esp. 79.

Through this temporally pending fulfillment and its accompanying place-lessness, the present becomes intensified, and sometimes at the expense of devaluing things of the past by giving primacy to the future.

Yet the primacy of the future is valid only for an orientation that is motivated by a 'productive dissatisfaction' with the present and is therefore willing to leave it behind for what is yet to be. The limit of this revolutionary hope is that which allows itself to be harnessed for the possibly militant modification of the situation. There is also a countervailing conservative hope that stands over against this radical hope, whose resistance encompasses a fear of change but also a genuine gratitude for the richness of the present. The orientation toward the future of this conservative or preserving hope is, however, ambivalent insofar as what is hoped for is what is still pending and will—as far as possible—resemble the past and fleeting present.

Two sources of hope are simultaneously mirrored in the radical and revolutionary hope, on the one hand, and its countervailing conservative trajectory, on the other. Is hope based primarily in the experience of the past or does hope issue essentially from the imagined future? Are the futures of the past, which have now receded to become the past, those which currently bequeath to us hope? Or maybe it is the anticipation of the not-yet that draws us, lures us, and fills us with hope.²¹ From one perspective, the future appears as merely a series of present actions predicated as a mediated mode of time.²² From another perspective, the future appears rife with potential disappointments the depth of which correspond to the extent and intensity of our expectations.

Thus far we have considered a number of central distinctions within the grammar of hope. While this is hardly an exhaustive analysis, it does serve as the groundwork of what follows. We have elaborated the logical status of hope between necessity and impossibility; we have distinguished between hope and other related terms that circulate in its conceptual neighborhood; and, finally, we have underlined the drive or motivation internal to hope as an existential dynamic. We are now in a position where we can combine these findings with the genuinely biblical concept of promise as hope's intentional object.

2.3. Promises and Hopes

When one brings the biblical promises and the hope of faith into relationship with a philosophical grammar of hope, everything changes. Just as the concept of 'hope' oscillates between two primary uses, so too does 'promise'. On the one hand, there is promise as object, towards which the hope of an individual or of an entire people (or community) is directed. This is often the hope assumed by and placed upon leading protagonists like the patriarchs or Moses not only in and for themselves, but also and more especially for the welfare and, sometimes, for the woe of those they represent (extending outward from the protection of God's chosen people to the peace for all people).²³ On the other hand, there is promise as qualification rooted in the conviction

²¹ On this alternative see Friedrich Gogarten, *Verhängnis und Hoffnung der Neuzeit. Die Säkularisierung als theologisches Problem* (Stuttgart: Vorwerk, 1953), 123.

²² Cf. Hans Blumenberg, *Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974), 43 and 45.

²³ See Matthias Köckert, 'Verheißung' (AT), in TRE Vol. 34, 697-704. Promises mostly apply to individuals (the patriarchs or Hagar or leaders such as Moses, Exod. 32:10), to the king (2 Sam. 7:8-16; 1 Kings 11:31-39) or on occasion even to non-Israelites (Isa. 19:19-25; Zeph. 3:9-10). On the concrete contents of the promise: gathering and return of the people (esp. Isa. 11; 27; 35; 43; 60); possession of the land and living in it (Isaiah and Hosea); increase of the people (Isa. 49; 60; 65; Jer. 33; Ezek. 36); comprehensive peace (Isa. 2:2-4; Hos. 2:20; Mic. 4:1-4; Ezek. 39:9-10); a new heaven and a new earth (Isa. 65:17-25).

that God is the one who remains the sole subject of the promise. People can promise something or even—in the double sense of the word—promise themselves. What differentiates human from divine promising, however, is that to foretell something when promising falls finally to God alone.²⁴ Leaving aside the popular and simplistic thesis that Old and New Testaments relate to each other as promise and fulfillment,²⁵ it is possible to discern in both Testaments the way that promise grounds hope in time even as hope forms a response to God's promise to hold Godself accountable to God. Or to formulate it somewhat more succinctly: *promise is the grounding substance of hope, while hope is the qualified ideal of promise.*²⁶

The response to the question 'What is the promise of hope?' is consequently not something indefinite, a range of possibilities, but rather something quite specific. Whoever hopes expresses a longing, a yearning, a need, that points beyond the merely here and now.²⁷ Moreover, the fact of human hope also implies that we do not remain indifferent vis-à-vis God, but rather we want something from God that which is not yet. In God's promise, a reality is precisely announced, anticipated, and attested as not yet there, but which God may bring. Nevertheless, one who hopes in God—and thus who turns to God in praise, thankfulness and appeal—can be understood as a living sign of hope that 'marks' human persons as hopeful creatures.²⁸ A close relationship between hoping and requesting—living in acknowledged dependency on God—emerges into view. In other words, the act of hoping is an intrinsic aspect of faith and, together with prayer as petition, forms and permeates the entire life of faith.

A person of faith hopes for something that she cannot give herself. Or, to express the same thing conversely, everything which she could give herself is not the object of her believing hope.²⁹ 'Hoped for' here is truly that which is humanly impossible, and precisely because it is impossible for the human, it shows itself as remaining possible for God alone. All examples of human hoping we can think of—from the promise of unexpected children to hope in the resurrection vouched for through Christ—follow this pattern exactly: the fulfillment of our hoped-for promises is always due to God alone.

Might God have fulfilled God's promises without our hopes? Or does God only fulfill them when and as we hope? If it is true that God is the only one capable of promising—on the supposition that God's promise is the sole basis for hope, because given by God alone—then our own human hoping somehow already participates in the reality

²⁴ The central theological difference between promise and auguring has a parallel in the difference between *human* condoning and *God's* forgiveness; on this see Christoph Siebert, 'Versprechen und Verzeihen. Zwei Grundbegriffe unseres ethischen Selbstverständnisses', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 109, no. 1 (2012): 70–95.

²⁵ On this already Rudolf Bultmann, 'Weissagung und Erfüllung' [1949], in idem, *Glauben und Verstehen II*, fourth edition (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1965), 162–186, 162; Walther Zimmerli, 'Verheißung und Erfüllung', 53–54.

²⁶ Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie. Band III* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1993), 196.

²⁷ Cf. Eberhard Jüngel, 'Die Autorität des bittenden Christus. Eine These zur materialen Begründung der Eigenart des Wortes Gottes. Erwägungen zum Problem der Infallibilität in der Theologie', in idem, *Unterwegs zur Sache. Theologische Bemerkungen* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1972), 179–188, 188; see St. Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, transl. from Latin by Sidney N. Deane, reprint edition (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1926), 77.

²⁸ So Eberhard Jüngel, 'Was heißt beten?' [1982], in idem, *Wertlose Wahrheit. Zur Identität und Relevanz des christlichen Glaubens. Theologische Erörterungen III*, second extended edition (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 397–405, 402.

²⁹ Cf. Eilert Herms, 'Was geschieht, wenn Christen beten?', in idem, *Offenbarung und Glaube. Zur Bildung des christlichen Lebens* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992), 517–31, 522.

of God's promise. And because God never gives anything less than Godself,³⁰ it is solely God in whom the believer is hoping in all human hopes. As we have noted from our analysis of the exegetical findings from scripture, there is a transition from a God who vouches for the hope in specific goods to a God who is the good that grounds all hopes. If we follow that (pro)grammatical transition from God as hope's foundation to God as hope's ultimate content and reality, then elaborating on the concept of hope in the way this essay does implies significant consequences both for our conception of God and for our understanding of God's salvific reality.

3. Hope in Ecstasy

3.1. Hope as an Act of Hoping

To this point, we have focused on the objects of hope, the *material* type of hope. We now turn to the other facets of hope sketched above, all of which belong to a second type of hope: the negative (absence of hope), the theo-logical (hoping in YHWH), and the hope used in reference to itself: hoping in hope. All three facets possess a common core. The point is not that hope is set *on* something but rather that one lives *in* hope. The central issue is not that circumstances still pending come to pass, but that the present is determined by hope. The core of each of the three facets is therefore modal: *hope as a way of being in the world*. Accordingly, 'modal' here means a qualification of other activities and their specification by unfolding significant traits that characterize these activities. This has two important implications: first, a modal qualification is not self-sufficient because it is simply a qualification of something else that is already presupposed (an 'activity'); second, the modal qualification does not, grammatically speaking, serve as a noun or verb but as an adverb. In other words, it qualifies *the way* the activity in question is brought about—namely, in hope or hopefully.

The transition from what is hoped for as object (*hoping that/for . . .*) to hoping as a relational action for what is still pending (*hoping in . . .*) reveals hope's anthropological dimension.³¹ 'What is a person?', Kant formulated succinctly,³² only to divide this question into a three-part form. 'What may I hope for?' constitutes Kant's well-known third element. Interestingly, Kant spends the longest time on this question as distinct from the epistemological and ethical questions. Not that the actual hoping marks a person already as person (*What does a person hope?*), but rather that the hoping elicits the notion of permission (*What is a person permitted or allowed to hope?*). 'Impermissible' acts of hoping, according to this view, would have a direct influence on the initial question about our personhood, underscoring the difference between authenticity and possible failure. This is intentionally formulated in a way that comes close to Martin Heidegger, who would arguably classify hope as 'existential,' insofar as he situates hope within the existential structure of care.³³

³⁰ Thus the happy phrase of Jean-Luc Marion, that reads in context: 'The point of the sacrament is to bestow God himself, not only his effects, also not only one of his gifts. When God gives, he never gives less than himself.' ('Die Phänomenalität des Sakraments. Wesen und Gegebenheit', in Michael Gabel / Hans Joas (eds.), *Von der Ursprünglichkeit der Gabe. Jean-Luc Marions Phänomenologie in der Diskussion* (Freiburg im Br./München: Alber, 2007), 78–95, 91).

³¹ Cf. John P. Day, 'Hope', 97.

³² *Critique of Pure Reason* A 805/B 833; see, again, M. Jamie Ferreira, 'Kant and Kierkegaard on Hope', esp. 108; Miriam Schleifer McCormick, 'Rational Hope', *Philosophical Explorations* 20, no. 1 (2017): 127–41.

³³ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), esp. §41.

Now this modal understanding of hope should not be understood as a mere addition to its material counterpart, for hidden behind the contrast between the concepts of material and of modal hope is a critical point that, when overlooked, frequently leads to an unnecessary reduction. The traditional idea of hope as that which anticipates a coming about in the future, tends to treat hoping as analogous to knowing, thinking, and expecting (that is, an act of presuming something to be the case).³⁴ Yet the statement 'that something is the case' is a proposition, and propositions are candidates for truth values; they are either true or false. If hope becomes a topic in this framework of truth values, then a number of unwelcome consequences follow. For one, it generates unnecessary frustration, given that in this framework we can only hope but cannot know when the transition from an uncertain hoping to a 'true' knowledge has succeeded (though, one might argue, we may not actually want to know if it has succeeded so that we can continue to hope). Moreover, placing hope within a truth-value framework misleads one in thinking that statements of hope are appropriate candidates for truth values. But hopes—like commands or questions—are neither true nor false. They are rather expressions judged to be more or less appropriate, realistic, or wise.

The criticism of what is called the 'propositionalization of hope' does not at all imply that the future dimension of hoping be dismissed. On the contrary, it calls attention to the intrinsic value of hoping as a way of existing in the world, an insight accepted by any sensible phenomenology of hope. Objects of hope (*what* is hoped for) do not therefore stand at the center but rather the mode of our relating to those objects (the *act and practice* of hoping).

All of human existence is determined by this act, which St. Paul states repeatedly, though interestingly only in the presence of believers (see 1 Thess. 4:13). Hope is accompanied by elation, joy, refreshment; it is woven into an intricate, interwoven fabric of emotions, attitudes, dispositions, and virtues. Hope comes close to trust in God, is nearly synonymous with God's reality itself (cf. 2 Cor. 3:4; Phil. 2:19; also, Eph. 2:12). Hope lives in the difference between the present and the future, between what instantly passes away and what awaits on the horizon of a still passing present. To live in hope is to live suspensefully, to abide in this tension.³⁵ By being oriented toward that which does not yield itself to our disposal, we are drawn to make 'strong valuations,'³⁶ a chief symptom of which is the fear that what is hoped for will not take place. Oftentimes, what we do not have, but can only hope for, proves to be the most important. Here the relationship between the hoped-for object and the hoping person becomes so intimately interfused that the one who truly hopes cannot help but be profoundly changed by the object of one's hope.

It is equally clear that precisely this intimacy can also take on dark traits, i.e., that hope can be tempted. The spectrum of the counter-concepts to hope is correspondingly broad: it spans the entire gamut from hopelessness, despair, melancholy, fear, *angst*, nostalgia and pessimism, on the one end, to, on the other end, a tendency to sink into a

³⁴ On this, see Ronald S. Downie, 'Hope', 250; Arne Grøn, 'Future of Hope—History of Hope', in *Hope: Re-examinations of an Elusive Phenomenon*, edited by Ingolf U. Dalferth and Marlene Block (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

³⁵ On this Claus Westermann states: 'Dieses gespannte Hingerichtetsein auf Gott ist da, wo Gott so angeordnet wird, wie in den Klagen des Volkes im Bekenntnis der Zuversicht.' ('Das Hoffen im Alten Testament', 239).

³⁶ So, Charles Taylor, 'Self-interpreting Animals' [1985], in idem, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 45-76, 65-66.

debilitating realism, a sense that everything is all too obvious, where our imagination is crushed and where our sense of possibility is neither cultivated nor is given a chance to speak, and where, finally, a comprehensive contentedness settles over everything such that the only real task that remains amounts to a mere administration of being.

Yet these counter-concepts to hope are easily misunderstood if they are regarded as simply set over against hope. Despair, for example, need not consist in abandonment of hope, but in the struggling relationship to it. As Arne Grøn observes, 'To despair is not simply to give up hope but rather to struggle with hope, at least in so far as despairing is the act of despairing.'³⁷ Hope does not simply forget its own counterpart, but remains aware that its other continually surrounds it, yet thereby—paradoxically—deepening it.

In sum, it is essential to appreciate hope in its twofold dimensions: hope as directed to particular objects and hope as an existential qualification of life in (and outside) faith. In light of the foregoing analysis, we are now able to specify with greater precision the initial claim of this essay concerning hope as a marginalized topic in contemporary theology. The tendency in modern theology is to treat 'hope' as an 'objective' idea.³⁸ My aim has been to regain a richer, more nuanced sense of hope theologically understood so as to see it as a significant starting point and mode for leading one's life before God.

3.1.1. *Fides et spes*

Our analysis of the twofold notion of hope—'hoping that . . .' and 'living in hope'—leads one to think that a similar distinction ought to be made in regard to the concept of faith. Here, too, it is important to differentiate between the content of faith and the performance of faith. Expressed in a classical Augustinian way, we must distinguish between *fides quae creditur* and *fides qua creditur*, albeit not in a way that disjoins the two—because there is hoping as an act and there is the content hoped for: *spes quae speratur* (hope that is hoped) and *spes ex qua speratur* (hope out of which one hopes).³⁹ Theologically speaking, the reference to *fides et spes* may be construed either as having hope as one of the essential ingredients of faith or, conversely, having faith in a way that acts as a qualifier of hope.⁴⁰ Let us consider briefly both versions.

In the first case, the specific contents of faith and hope could be identified together, so that everything that is believed in faith is at the same time an object of hope—and vice versa.⁴¹ However, the act of hoping and the performance of faith are asymmetric, since

³⁷ Arne Grøn, 'Future of Hope – History of Hope'.

³⁸ An interesting exception to this rule while subscribing to this critique is Christophe Chalamet's *A Most Excellent Way: An Essay on Faith, Hope, and Love* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020), esp. chapter 3.

³⁹ For more on this, see Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologische Enzyklopädie*, edited by Eberhard Jüngel and Klaus W. Müller (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984), 15–16.

⁴⁰ Paradigmatic for the bond between faith and hope is the biblical description of Abraham as one whose hoping faith is reckoned to him as righteousness. See Gen. 15:6 and Rom. 4:4; cf. also Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie III*, 197–98.

⁴¹ Against this it could be argued that, for example, in the Apostle's Creed each 'I believe . . .' would have to be replaced by an 'I hope . . . '—with the critical query (thus a colleague in conversation) of whether that were justified. I think it is! With an eye on the Apostolicum there is still another problem, since it does not speak of *spes*, but rather in the mode of *expectatio*, e.g.: 'expecto vitam aeternam'. Consequently, is the certainty of faith taken seriously when speaking of hope and should not the concept of expectation be given priority? Yet with that only comes the above-mentioned problems of the enforceability of what is expected, which suggests for the terminology that we speak of a 'reasonable hope,' in order to link both aspects meaningfully with one another.

the mode of hoping characterizes faith as act but not the other way around. In short, faith and hope have the same objects, but believing and hoping are not the same mode of being.⁴² This asymmetry is theologically decisive and significant. When faith itself is already a mode of being, but hope forms a qualifier of faith, then hope is a *second-order-mode*: through it the mode of faith is again modally specified.

In the second case, faith terminates hope, particularly as *fides*, but not *spes*, which stands for a comprehensive perspective on living. Accordingly, Gerhard Ebeling aptly states:

Faith is not a separate act, some speculative rising into the hereafter. Rather, faith is the determinedness of existence in this world, and is therefore not something *besides* all of what I do and suffer, hope and experience, but something that is concrete only *in* all of this, that is, the specificity of my acting, suffering, hoping and experiencing.⁴³

To 'believe,' therefore, does not lie on the same level as all other actions, including hoping. Rather *fides* stands for a qualification of the whole of life, to which the act of hoping also belongs.⁴⁴

In the one case, hope has a modal privilege over against faith, so that the ironic paraphrase of 1 Cor. 13:13 with which this essay began would have to be taken back, because hope in no way appears to be 'lesser' than its cardinal siblings faith and love.⁴⁵ A theologically radicalized concept of faith represents this scenario, inasmuch as there would no longer be a consistent concept of *spes*, but rather the hope of faith would be strictly distinguished vis-à-vis all determinations *extra fidem*. Hoping in faith would accordingly mean something 'completely different' than hoping without faith.

In the other case, the situation is reversed. Faith would hold the modal privilege to qualify everything anew: life (*existential*), thought (*cognitive*), action (*ethical-political*), and emotion (*emotive*). Representing this scenario is a hermeneutical concept of faith that understands it as a total perspective of the whole of life, an understanding—as it is expressed pointedly in Ebeling—that emphasizes the continuity of both hoping in and hoping without faith.⁴⁶

How then do both versions relate to one another? Must we decide between them? I do not think we have to. To be sure, it is correct that faith as a comprehensive designation refers to everything as qualifier—and therefore includes all acts of hoping. Yet it

⁴² Jürgen Moltmann speaks of this as follows: faith is granted the *prius*, hope, however, the *primat*; see *Theologie der Hoffnung*, 16 and 209.

⁴³ Gerhard Ebeling, *Das Wesen des christlichen Glaubens* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1959), 208. This passage directly reflects on what above is described as 'modally specified'.

⁴⁴ More precisely on this, see Hartmut von Sass, *Gott als Ereignis des Seins. Versuch einer hermeneutischen Onto-Theologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 67–73.

⁴⁵ This essay is, in fact, focused on clarifying the relation between faith and hope, whereas love—and other qualifying modes such as trust, charity, and gratitude—do not play a significant role here. There is a practical reason for this, given the fact that the concept of hope is already a complex one. There is, moreover, also a thematic reason: namely, faith's ecstasy is based on hope, not on love. My focus on faith rather than love is justified, I contend, insofar as my interest is centered in a morally and socially active faith and since my engagement is based on hope turning faith ecstatic.

⁴⁶ An interesting question that cannot be dealt with here in any great detail is whether an indexical moment belongs to hoping, that is, whether the act of hoping is able to be orientationally and philosophically characterized and therefore contains a localizing feature that is dependent on a particular person. For more on indexicality in general, see Robert Stalnaker, 'Indexical Belief', *Synthese* 49, no. 2 (1981): 129–151.

is also correct to say that precisely this relation to hope does not leave faith altogether untouched by that which it qualifies. The ‘determinedness of existence’ is at the same time itself determined by that to which it is modally related. In other words, the hope that is qualified through faith conversely works also modally on faith.

While a causal relation obtains between faith as a comprehensive designation and all acts of hoping as but qualified aspects of faith, the modal determinations of faith vis-à-vis hope relate to each other reciprocally. In brief: hope is able to determine faith (*mode of the second order*), because and only insofar as this faith also determines hope (*causal*).

3.2. In Ecstasy

What does this mean concretely? The answer leads us to what will be called ecstasy. Indeed, the doctrine of ecstasy is well known to theology. Wolfhart Pannenberg, for example, writes, ‘The ecstatic moment in the essence of faith makes understandable how the subject of hope can be included in the act of faith.’⁴⁷

The act of hoping determines the mode of faith as an ecstasy. In other words, faith comes to its ecstatic character *through* hope. This is precisely the qualification that *spes* provides for *fides*. Ecstasy here means literally ‘not (only) being by oneself’ but rather ‘to be out of one’s self,’ ‘de-(ar)anged.’ Ecstasy thus refers to what is at first a value-neutral structure that determines not hope but the act of hoping. In other words, the hoped-for object itself is not ecstatic, but the person who lives in hope. Hope takes place solely in the person who relates through hope to the hoped-for—in *ecstasy*.

In numerous ways hope turns faith into this ‘dis-located’ condition. One way this happens is through the dimension of time, which has already been briefly mentioned. The believer is no longer only by him/herself but rather above and beyond self, oriented toward future matters, which even now already determine the present and allow the past to be newly examined from a point not even reached yet. A collective dimension is also already at play: faith, according to Christian understanding, hopes not for itself and by itself alone; an ecstatic being-with-others precludes any alleged hope-egoism. Furthermore, we have a genuine theological dimension here: a person lives in an ecstatic sense beyond one’s possibilities in and by a hoping faith, because what is hoped is entirely indebted to and solely dependent on the one upon whom hope is set, namely, God.

Invoking the concept of theological ecstasy generates two primary objections. First, some object that the concept cannot be fruitfully inserted into theological debates because ‘ecstasies’ designate something necessarily pathological.⁴⁸ But this objection confuses and conflates possibility and identification. Ecstasies, to be sure, can devolve into something negative. However, this in no way follows of necessity nor discredits the concept. The phenomenon of enthusiasm or a shared common joy are but two events that can be described as ecstatic. But by so describing them as ecstatic in character nothing pathological per se is necessarily suggested about either.⁴⁹

Second—and somewhat more specifically—it could be objected that the ecstasy of faith is not at all dependent upon hope, for either something other than *spes* could very well provide the ecstatic moment of *fides*, or faith already itself evinces an ecstatic

⁴⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie III*, 196.

⁴⁸ The term ecstasy has entered theological discourse through the reception of Pannenberg’s general anthropological structures. So a colleague in verbal discussion.

⁴⁹ See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (London: T&T Clark, 1985).

character and therefore requires no external qualification.⁵⁰ The first of these observations is evidently unproblematic. That there are other sources than hope that allow faith to become ecstatic simply means that hope remains an important even if not the exclusive source of the *ekstasis*. There remains the second version of this objection, however, to which some concessions must be made. Regarding the genuinely theo-logical dimension, it is true that something ecstatic does indeed appertain to faith in itself, because God becomes present beyond the possibility of a person. Something analogical may also apply to the collective dimension of ecstasy, insofar as faith does not remain a private action but is inextricably embedded in a shared tradition so that this social factor need not be owed first to hope. However, it looks somewhat different when we regard the first-mentioned dimension where *fides* does not merge entirely into something purely present but is essentially a result of the hoping orientation which enables the temporal distinction between Now and Then. That faith is a constantly hoping faith, and that therefore differentiating between faith and hope is merely analytical, not actual, conceals as a result the dynamic, merely outlined here, whereby *fides* temporally can become ecstatic only through *spes*.

In this, faith that has become ecstatic through hope does not in any way unify or perfect a person. On the contrary, the ecstasy splits and opens the person. It creates a contradiction between Now and Then, between Being and Becoming, between the experienced Present and the promised Future. Only one who 'feels' (as Schleiermacher would likely say) this contradiction in oneself, without wishing to resolve it, remains alive. Indeed, only one who remains so distended in hope is able to move, work, imagine, and desire.⁵¹

Thus the 'feeling and taste' of religion for reality would be completely mistaken if one conceived of faith as conformity with what 'actually' is. This conformity is not about a correspondence between faith and things. The hopeful ecstatic faith lives much more from an *inadaequatio fidei et rei*, insofar as the promised reality is announced as not yet here and yet, paradoxically, even now already relates critically to the present situation precisely in its absence. Moltmann says: 'Only hope is to be called "realistic," because only it takes seriously the possibilities that pervade everything real.'⁵² In this way, the promise proves its truth and sets the reader and listener in that *inadaequatio ad rem*—decidedly against the ideal of conformity with oneself and the other—in a new context of Being.⁵³ Precisely *not* to conform to things as they are is then the 'higher reality'⁵⁴ of faith. Indeed, a theology that is engaged orients itself exactly in this way.

⁵⁰ For more on this, see Johannes Fischer, *Leben aus dem Geist. Zur Grundlegung christlicher Ethik* (Zürich: TVZ, 1994), 151–53.

⁵¹ So Jürgen Moltmann states: 'Lebendig ist etwas nur, wenn es den Widerspruch in sich enthält und zwar diese Kraft ist, den Widerspruch in sich zu fassen und auszuhalten.' (*Theologie der Hoffnung*, 311).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵³ Cf. *ibid.*, 107; further *ibid.*, 309–11; critically against this Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie III*, 199–200. There are interesting parallels between *inadaequatio* as it is conceived in Moltmann's *Theologie der Hoffnung* (as difference between the present and the hoped-for future) and Eberhard Jüngel's work on the metaphors of faith (as difference between being-so [*Sosein*] and the advent of the promise [*Zuspruch*]); see Eberhard Jüngel, 'Metaphorische Wahrheit. Erwägungen zur theologischen Relevanz der Metapher als Beitrag zur Hermeneutik einer narrativen Theologie', in *idem*, *Entsprechungen: Gott – Wahrheit – Mensch. Theologische Erörterungen* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1980), 103–57, esp. 104 and 134–37.

⁵⁴ Friedrich D.E. Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion. Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* [1799], edited by Hans-Joachim Rothert (Hamburg: Meiner, 1958), 31.

In sum, 'hope's ecstasy' captures two crucial aspects: first, faith transgresses the Here and Now by being hopeful and, second, in hoping for something to come faith adopts a posture that places it in decisively critical tension with its actual environment. It is this very tension that lies at the heart of faith's commitment and engagement.

4. Hope as Subject of an Engaged Theology

4.1. Engagement!

Who wishes not to be engaged? Indeed, what teaching about God and about faith dares to describe itself as a disengaged theology? Engagement of course means endeavor, commitment, and effort. It costs something. It has to be wrested from the zero point of pure contemplation. In that sense it remains a choice and is counted by those who choose this way as an expression of a self-understanding that contradicts itself should it remain inactive, unengaged, detached. Thus, to get involved is the 'unconstrained constraint' of that non-stoic attitude. One who dares to hope also risks making oneself vulnerable, but also visible—and becomes earnest: it's serious! Engagement, in other words, leads one out of the safe confines of the manageable immanence of the private-personal and into the *Sitz im Leben* of the public sphere to be mutually shaped.⁵⁵

Faith also belongs in the public sphere, as does the theology that thinks about it. A faith that passes by life without having any effect on it would remain an absurdity—which is why 'By their fruits you shall know them' (Matt. 7:16a) is so significant. To define faith as fruitful and as such engaged does not thereby add anything to the concept of *fides*; rather, it unfolds what has long since been contained in it.⁵⁶ Does it follow that the reflectiveness of theology ought also to be engaged, so that the effective faith to which it is responsible forces it to act now, to move, to strive to do justice to its own task?

To answer 'Yes!' is correct but it is also controversial. There is an awkward silence on societal topics not only with respect to internalized faith and not only in regard to churches occupied with themselves, but also within academic theology—all of which is tremendously irritating. Out of this irritation comes my suggestion: *in sifting through its rich dogmatic resources, theology may well discover the topic of hope that is as demanding as it is promising for regaining this engagement.*

An engaged theology confronts three essential questions. What will it support and what can it support (*material*)? What means will it use to this purpose (*medial*)? What are the reasons for it to perform this action in the first place (*motivational*)? The first question relates to the specific contents of the engagement. I think here especially of social-ethical challenges like handling resources, environment and nature, problems of social justice and political participation, the persistent gender gap, all forms of suppression as well as the possibilities and prospects for peace-making activities. That the church and theology should see their calling as one of throwing themselves into the fray is just as evident as the opposite, namely, to draw back from direct, concrete engagement and instead conceive of its chief mission as that of analyzing and commenting upon all problems. The 'auto-suggestively produced compulsion to interfere' leads then merely to a 'guardianship of comprehensive prophetic jurisdiction,' which through its pretense to

⁵⁵ On this see Sebastian Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere: Public Theology as a Catalyst for Open Debate* (London: SCM Press, 2011).

⁵⁶ Cf. William E. Mann, 'Hope', in *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*, edited by Eleonore Stump (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 251-80, esp. 254.

omnipotence quickly wears out the possibility for effective action. An engaged theology will therefore show its prudence by coupling meaningful, active presence with selective self-limitation.⁵⁷

The second question concerns the paths an engaged theology could take so as to be seen, read, and heard. The medium is not the message, to be sure, yet without the appropriate medium the message would simply evaporate. This raises the question of what other means besides the publication media of established academic circles might an engaged theology deploy to foster and widen its reception. To put the matter somewhat differently, what sort of translation of the theological 'sense resources' is necessary if constituencies distanced from theology are to be engaged? Surely the responsibility for acquiring specialized dogmatic vocabulary and methods of theological reflection does not fall to an academic and journalistic feuilleton alone. Thus, an engaged theology seeks out allies and fellow travelers enlisting thereby resources from the non-theological 'discourse of modernity' in an effort to advance a cooperative transmission of its voice(s).⁵⁸

There remains, finally, the question about theology's motivation to understand itself as engaged, and accordingly to involve itself beyond the closed halls of the purely academic life. That faith should be engaged, if it wishes to avoid misunderstanding and self-contradiction, has been stressed already. Yet to shift the onus of *fides* directly onto theology would be to draw a wrong conclusion, for academic theology as such would not necessarily contradict itself if it leaves concrete engagement in the world to others. That said, any implicitly latent theological disengagement nonetheless remains unsatisfying. This can be shown in two different ways. First, theology may understand itself classically as a 'function of the church' with all the attendant responsibilities for the faith in which it participates and to which it pledges itself. Second, theology may understand its task as providing an intellectual voice within the public sphere alongside other voices from culture, politics, and philosophy, without at the same time claiming its academic right to the practical participation in a praxis of faith. The objection that a non-engaged theology contradicts itself would apply only if one assumes the first self-understanding of theology. Without denying the possibility of a theology that limits itself to diagnosing and interpreting religious language-games while at the same time being fully engaged, the question remains whether the kind of engagement considered here is one that is derived from hope between promise and ecstasy.

This question remains open, and I will leave it aside for present purposes. What follows applies only to a theology that refuses to strictly cut itself off from the faith it studies and ponders. This brings us to what has been coined 'Political Theology.'

4.2. The Hope of Political Theology

The kind of hope that characterizes political theology is not about one kind of engagement or another, but about the kind of engagement that faith essentially owes

⁵⁷ All quotations in this paragraph from Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, *Die Wiederkehr der Götter. Religion in der modernen Kultur*, third edition (München: C.H. Beck, 2007), 256-7.

⁵⁸ This last paragraph is consciously filled with references to Habermas, to emphasize the—not entirely unproblematic—analogy between the translation of religious content and its theological companion into its non-religious or un-theological counterpart (linked with the question about the responsible subject of the translation); cf. Jürgen Habermas, 'Religion in der Öffentlichkeit. Kognitive Voraussetzungen für den 'öffentlichen Vernunftgebrauch' religiöser und säkularer Bürger', in idem, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion. Philosophische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2005), 119-54.

itself. I am not alone in adopting this view. There are many other prominent versions of this understanding of theological engagement. Take Jürgen Moltmann, for example, who, over fifty years ago in his *Theology of Hope*, objected to the tendency to separate the world and the Kingdom of God. His impression was that too often theology and the church had turned their backs on the 'hostile' world, relegating it to little more than a 'waiting room for the Kingdom of God.'⁵⁹ Yet after the age of love (the Middle Ages [sic!]) and an era of belief (Reformation), the modern epoch of hope has now dawned in which the unconditional is to be sought precisely in the conditional—i.e., in liberation, justice, peace.⁶⁰ During the same period Dorothee Sölle and William Hamilton also criticized the tendency to de-politicize the gospel. Accordingly, they rejected as a 'heresy' an understanding of theologically relevant statements as purely theological—i.e., as refusing to draw political consequences from them.⁶¹ Instead, they reconnected theological language with the language of Jesus in order to bring to light the gospel's political relevance, a move that stands in sharp contrast to attempts at replacing the language of Jesus with kerygmatic solidification.⁶²

'Political Theology' has entered modern church history under the rubric of 'A Theology of Hope.'⁶³ Even as one acknowledges the significant and divergent developments within that program in contemporary theology, one must also recognize that a few of the leading proponents of a 'Theology of Hope,' like Moltmann and Sölle, were already documenting some of the limits of this project.⁶⁴ While Moltmann understands the individual to be a co-worker of God (in a nearly Catholic manner),⁶⁵ Sölle characterizes the individual as a representative of the impotent God.⁶⁶ Moltmann's and Sölle's turn against the abstract formalism of their teachers is quite understandable in their

⁵⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, 'Ethik der Hoffnung: Widerstand und Antizipation', in idem, *Politische Theologie – politische Ethik* (München / Mainz: Chr. Kaiser 1984), 162–65, 162.

⁶⁰ Thus in 'Was ist und was will 'Politische Theologie'?', in *ibid.*, 152–55, 154.

⁶¹ See Dorothee Sölle, *Politische Theologie: Auseinandersetzung mit Rudolf Bultmann* (Stuttgart: Kreuz Verlag, 1982), 41, 44, 61–62; also, William Hamilton, 'The Death of God Theology', *The Christian Scholar* 48, no. 1 (1965): 27–48, esp. 31–33.

⁶² Cf. Sölle, *Politische Theologie*, 44; see also John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), esp. chapter 8: 'Christ and Power'; idem, 'The Political Axioms of the Sermon on the Mount', in idem, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), 34–51.

⁶³ Sölle herself already thought, looking back, that the 'Political Theology' belonged to (church) history; it is 'a too cautious, too formal, too ambiguous concept,' so that today it is better to speak of a 'theology of liberation'. Dorothee Sölle, 'Bultmann und die Politische Theologie', in idem, *Das Fenster der Verwundbarkeit. Theologisch-politische Texte* (Stuttgart: Kreuz Verlag, 1987), 137–48, 145.

⁶⁴ As is well-known, the term 'Political Theology' was shadowed from the very beginning on since it goes back to Carl Schmitt whose political (and theological) conservatism set the foundation for his participation in the Nazi movement in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The recent debate running under the heading 'political theology' emancipated itself from this background to find itself in a significantly different political environment of (post)democracy, late neo-liberal capitalism (and its blind spots), and globalization (and its counter-parts). Cf. Kathryn Tanner, *Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), esp. 225–58; Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018); see also the 'Political Theology network' and its journal: <https://politicaltheology.com/>.

⁶⁵ Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, 'Ethik der Hoffnung: Widerstand und Antizipation', 164. It is well-known that the phrase *cooperator Dei* can also be meant in a good Lutheran way, yet constantly with the qualification that being a co-worker is owed to, and made possible by, God. Moltmann does see it precisely so, yet the accents are set differently in his writings from the 1950s and 1960s.

⁶⁶ See Dorothee Sölle, *Stellvertretung. Ein Kapitel Theologie nach dem 'Tode Gottes'* (Stuttgart: Kreuz Verlag, 1982), 148 and 161.

plea for theological engagement. Indeed, it is hard to imagine most representatives of dialectical and hermeneutic theology wanting to change the world in a theologically responsible way. To a large extent, the programmatic individualism of existential philosophy hindered these authors not only from thinking socio-politically but prompted them to issue cautionary warnings of the dangers attending theological programs that reinterpret the gospel in terms of a quasi-socialist manifesto.⁶⁷ For some, however, like Dorothee Sölle, an existential interpretation had to be carried forward into a political theology.⁶⁸

Yet this politico-theological program of liberation initiated by the likes of Moltmann and Sölle is now in danger of structurally committing the very mistake as did the program it challenged.⁶⁹ If Bultmann and his followers were open to the charge of reflecting upon *hoping without hope* and ecstasy without the promised future, then current advocates of political theology are under suspicion of working single-handedly on realizing the divine promises without doing justice to *the ecstatic mode of hoping*. In the Bultmannian-existential approach a flight from the world looms, because it knows no real future, only the eschaton in the moment.⁷⁰ In the case of political-liberation theology, on the other hand, the danger lies in its tendency to objectify hope as a template for what will be the case. Consequently, statements about the future hope begin to look a lot like what was rejected as ‘propositionalization’ (see ‘*Hope as an Act of Hoping*’ above). So much for the diagnosis. But what does the therapy look like?

One way to proceed, perhaps, is by considering the following questions: Which moment in the architecture of hope should be given priority? Which form of ecstasy is the fundamental one? Is it the *external-temporal*, which thinks in terms of time’s divisions between now and then? Or is it the *internal-theological* that opens the believer up to God’s future, which to us appears as an impossibility but to God as solely possible? From what I have argued, it is clear that the second path is the most promising. The believer hopes in ecstasy not because there are promises that will be realized at some point in the immediate or distant future. This way of conceiving hope leads but to a

⁶⁷ Dorothee Sölle, *Politische Theologie*, 56 and 61–62.

⁶⁸ See *ibid.*, chapter 1. Yet there are differentiations to be made in this critical dialogue. For one thing the ‘political theology’ of that time was not all of one piece. Sölle can already criticize Moltmann for converting the apocalyptic into a mythology (so *ibid.*, 57). For another, the above reserve is oriented strongly toward the early Barth as well as Bultmann and Gogarten, whose cultural-(Protestant) critique did indeed create a considerable distance from the issues raised by Sölle and Moltmann. See, for example, Friedrich Gogarten, ‘Die Krisis der Kultur’ [1920], in *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie. Teil 2: Rudolf Bultmann – Friedrich Gogarten – Eduard Thurneysen*, edited by Jürgen Moltmann (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1963), 101–21. There were, however, definitely voices who, unlike Bultmann, thought politically-theologically, both before (for example, Emil Brunner, *Gerechtigkeit. Eine Lehre von den Grundgesetzen der Gesellschaftsordnung* (Zürich: TVZ, 1943), esp. chapters 10 and 20) as also after 1945 (for example, the ‘left-wing’ Barthianism or – in hermeneutic theology in the narrower sense – Gerhard Ebeling. See ‘Theologie und Wirklichkeit’ [1956], in *idem*, *Wort und Glaube*, second edition (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1962), 192–202; *idem*, ‘Die Botschaft von Gott an das Zeitalter des Atheismus’ [1963], in *idem*, *Wort und Glaube. Zweiter Band: Beiträge zur Fundamentaltheologie und zur Lehre von Gott* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1969), 372–95).

⁶⁹ In more contemporary accounts of Political Theology the relation between religious faith and democracy plays the central role within a ramified and complex discourse; see David Newheiser, ‘Why the World Needs Negative Political Theology’, *Modern Theology* 36, no. 1 (2020): 5–12; for non-theological accounts of a political engagement within a democratic context cf. Alan Mittelman, *Hope in a Democratic Age: Philosophy, Religion, and Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), chapter 6 and the ‘conclusion’; Dieter Thomä, *Warum Demokratien Helden brauchen. Plädoyer für einen zeitgemäßen Heroismus* (Berlin: Uhlstein, 2019), 189–202 and 232–36.

⁷⁰ The final passage of Rudolf Bultmann’s *Geschichte und Eschatologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1958) serves as an example: ‘Jeder Augenblick ist ein eschatologischer. Du mußt ihn erwecken!’ (184).

new program of de-mythologizing where, by means of ever-constant rounds of interpretation, God's promises are rendered meaningful. The path of ecstatic hope, on the contrary, recognizes that the believer is divided into the old and new person, which points to the promise of a real future. A believer thus hopes in a 'new Jerusalem', not because God's dominion is somehow pending but because through faith the believer understands herself and everything else *as* the dominion of God.

Promises are not simply autarkic linguistic expressions; rather, they become what they are through hoping in them. This means that believing in promises in the sense of hoping in them is what truly orients oneself toward things of the future. Moreover, the act of promising presumes a context of hoping for the believer in which they are of themselves incapable of delivering the hoped-for facts of that promised future. For whatever those facts may be are already based in the counter-factual act of hoping as a way of being in the world. The temporal-realistic hope is thus only possible insofar as a modal-hermeneutic act of hoping precedes and accompanies it. Or, to put it more succinctly and pointedly: *promises are an interpretation qualified by hoping in them; the act of hoping is the eschatological implication of the promise.*⁷¹ Hence, the distinction between a modal and a material concept of hope developed earlier in this essay ('*Hope as an Act of Hoping*') helps us deal with some of the unnecessary hitches traditionally connected to Political Theology.

4.3. Hope: the 'never finished' of faith

How, then, to practice this ecstatic hope? One begins, I would argue, by recognizing that we are already in the middle of it! In the antiphony of promise and ecstasy the zero point of pure contemplation is already overcome so that every attempt to keep separate faith, church, and theology appears for what it is: a self-contradiction. For those who no longer understand themselves merely in terms of their worldly conditions, but as creatures of God, will then hope to lead a life before God in responsibility for others and for themselves. At the same time, and in accord with their neighbors, they will fight against the tendency to slide into inauthenticity. Those who acknowledge other human beings *as* neighbor, but also *as* enemy, will hope that their shared equality before God motivates their striving for justice in the world—a motivation that does not allow them to be merely content to watch when inequality becomes manifest among peoples, races, and genders. For whoever is aware of the 'realities in which we live' (Hans Blumenberg) as facets of God's world will commit themselves 'hopefully' to the world and become advocates and ambassadors of that *shalom* that enters not only into the 'new Jerusalem,' but also into the 'new' New Mexico, New York, and New Zealand.

There are, of course, a number of reservations and objections to the position outlined here: some will charge that it is still too vague, much too idealistic in its goals, and far too pastoral in its tone. There is some truth to this. These reservations express something of the very concrete practical, dogmatic, and political difficulties that attend any attempt to win back hope as a guiding theme for theology. Take but one example: the relation between faith's hope and the belief in God's good creation. Hope's ecstasy constitutes the normative tension between *Is* and *Ought* and compels faith to be morally and politically engaged in environmental ethics and related activities that reflect the Christian belief in God and in God's creation. The virtue of this example is in its ability

⁷¹ Hence obtains *spes quaerens intellectum – spero ut intelligam*; see Jürgen Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung*, 28.

to clarify the way that hope cannot be limited to the merely anthropocentric, but essentially includes the cosmos—the physical universe—as integral to its future. Christian eschatology unavoidably goes hand in hand with a full-blown theology of nature. This example of the relation between faith's hope and the belief in God's good creation reminds us that the practical specification required here has only just begun, has at best only just been alluded to and is by no means sufficiently addressed.

While I accept the force of these objections and reservations, for me what is at stake is not primarily the direction of the content of an engaged theology, but its 'fundament,' that is, its motivational (back)grounds. By focusing on the motivational ground(s) of hope, I have endeavored to show that *hope is the 'never finished' of faith* and that *faith's productivity and dissatisfaction becomes clarified when made to pass through the lens of the creative ecstasy of hope*.

What, then, awaits us when all of our hopes have reached their end—namely, when they have been fulfilled? Does this mean that a hope that has come to rest is but the deathbed of a now hopeless faith? Here the first ambivalence begins to show itself, for an act of hoping maintains an effective relationship to the hoped-for—suggesting, perhaps, *you can get it, if you really want it!* This way of putting it is but shorthand for an 'economy of hope' according to which hoping for *p* causally raises the probability that *p* happens.⁷² Hope, on this account, remains not only ambivalent but it effectively turns into tragedy because it undermines itself. Hope, it seems, cannot survive its own fulfillment, its own *telos*; the more one's hopes are realized, the less likely there will be hope in reserve.

Yet this scenario of comprehensive, final fulfillment eludes a healthy realism, particularly as the contingencies of our everyday life demands that we recognize and accept hopes that must constantly remain open. Max Frisch's *Fragebogen* (the *Questionnaire*) states this well:

No revolution has perfectly fulfilled the hope of those who have made it. Do you conclude from this fact that the great hope is laughable, that revolution is superfluous, that only the hopeless save themselves from disappointments, etc., what do you hope for from such saving?⁷³

In addition to the experience of the essential openness of hope, Frisch points to a second interpretation, one that helps to circumvent the end of hope as its fulfillment (understood as termination or cessation). Even the 'saving' commits us to a renewed hope, so that a hope is thereby precisely fulfilled in nurturing a further hope: *regressus spei ad infinitum*?

The enduring truth of Frisch's reflections is confirmed by the myriad testimonies and observations of those who have faced the factual non-fulfillment of their hopes and yet have persevered. These experiences of disappointed hope are scarcely sufficient to bring about the end of all hope, not to mention a debilitating fatalism where faith appears as nothing but a 'dead option.' We require an *a priori* argument to avert that end—and we have this argument already. If hermeneutical privilege belongs to the act of hoping—an act that precedes all contents of the hope—then hoping stands as a mode of being in the world both *before* and *after* the individual fulfillments (or non-fulfillments)

⁷² Luc Bovens, 'The Value of Hope', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 59, no. 3 (1999): 667–81, 671 and 680.

⁷³ Max Frisch, *Fragebogen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972), question 21, p. 31.

of what is hoped for. If in this mode of existence the act of hoping first qualifies the hoped-for as such, then apparently hope knows no end. Rather it is constantly eager for something new and other because it lives 'in hope against all hope.' Can one hope when one senses that there can be no final fulfillment? Whoever answers affirmatively comes up against a second, greater ambivalence. For now the essential non-fulfillment of the hoping becomes the condition for the possibility of the hope that remains the 'never finished' of faith.

A 'salutary syllogism of engaged theology' may be summarized as follows:

Hoping allows faith to become ecstatic;

Ecstatic faith does not directly correlate with things;

In this non-correlation, however, everything will be newly understood *as promise*;

Because there are promises there is hope in and for the present time;

And in and for this time being faith is engaged *out of necessity*.

Engaged theology therefore accords hope a central place, which means that where hope is central an engaged theology cannot be far away. Understood in this way, the label 'engaged theology' stands not for a new program but more as a reminder of that which theology already always has been, and should have been, not (only) by itself, but rather beyond itself 'de-(ar)ranged' in the world. My hope is that readers might appreciate not only that this essay has been about an engaged theology but that is, in some small measure, itself an example of it.